Defining Bias #8: Lack of Transparency

BY **PESACH BENSON** - DECEMBER 28, 2016

Part eight of an eight-part series explaining The 8 Categories of Media Bias.

Violation #8: Lack of Transparency

Failing to be open and accountable to readers.

The issue of media transparency goes right to the heart of the deepest questions about journalism.

Is media objectivity possible? Is there even such a thing as true objectivity? Can't reporters have opinions too? Shouldn't correspondents' experiences and worldviews enhance their work?

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And if journalists are working with an attitude or agenda, how can we judge the credibility of our news?

Even if it were possible for reporters to check their biases at the door or have editors constantly whispering ethical guidelines in their ears, we'd still be placing blind trust in journalists.

The response to these questions is ***transparency***.

Watch author and former journalist for AP, NPR & CBC Mark Lavie, author and former senior editor for Haaretz Adi Schwartz, the Times of Israel's Haviv Rettig Gur and Michele Chabin of USA Today and other papers discuss issues of media transparency.

Just as scientific studies disclose their methodology so that their audiences can assess, critique, and replicate the findings, so too, we expect similar transparency from the news industry. We deserve disclosure when:

1. A journalist departs from the normal *methodology* of reporting.
2. Unusual *circumstances* the reporter worked under might affect his coverage.
3. There are potential *conflicts of interest*, or even appearances of it.
4. Transparency also demands the news industry's *responsiveness* to the public.

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(We'll elaborate with examples below.)

Disclosures can appear at the beginning or end of a story (such as an editor's note), within the article itself, or in a separate sidebar. On the air, the reporter or news anchor would make the disclosure. Opinion pieces, reviews, blogs, and social media posts may also require some kind of disclosure. Responsiveness means addressing reader questions in a respectful and timely way — usually by email, social media, a followup article or post (by the journalist or a more senior editor), or allowing someone a right of reply.

Transparency's a win-win situation. Readers are better able to judge news content, while reporters build credibility and trust with their audience.

At least, that's how it ought to be. Unfortunately, we've seen plenty of breakdowns.

Since this was first published, new examples have been added.

Methodology

Sometimes, it's necessary for journalists to depart from the normal methodology of reporting. Information may not be obtainable unless — for example — the reporter goes undercover (misrepresenting himself), uses a hidden camera (the subject doesn't know he's

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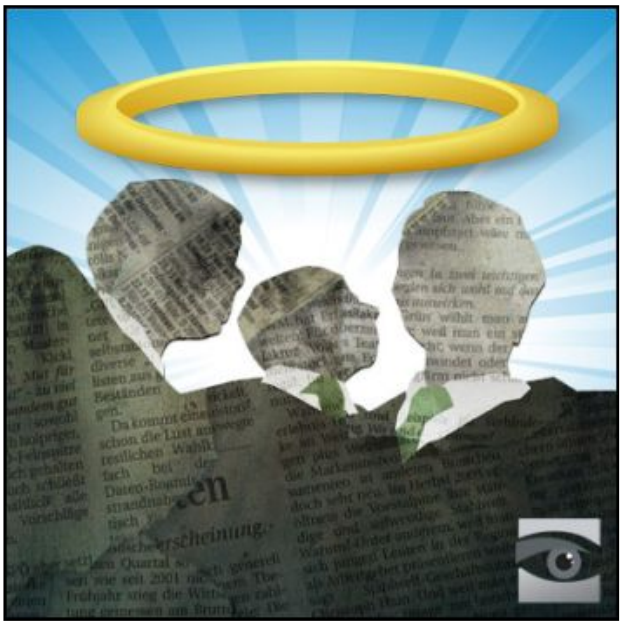
speaking on the record), relies on an anonymous source (readers can't gauge the source's credibility) or a leak (the unsanctioned release of information raises legal and ethical issues).

The questions we have to ask ourselves as news consumers are:

1. Did the reporter tell us *what* he did?
2. Did the reporter explain *why* he broke from the normal methodology?
3. Were there *other ways* to obtain the information?
4. Did the new information *justify* breaking from the methodology?

When journalists proactively address these questions, readers can fairly judge coverage for themselves.



The halo effect: Reporters often cite statistics from international agencies and non-governmental organizations without independently verifying the information. These agencies and NGOs are considered beyond reproach: hence the halo.

The best example of this phenomenon is the contentious casualty counts of conflicts in Gaza. UN figures are usually based on Hamas-run Gaza ministries and humanitarian agencies institutionally biased against Israel.

In 2009, Israeli journalist Simona Weinglass investigated why the Israeli and Palestinian casualty counts of Operation Cast Lead were so divergent, especially on the breakdown of civilian and armed casualties. Weinglass talked to officials from the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR) and B'Tselem, two organizations whose casualty figures were considered authoritative by the UN and international press, and also to Jonathan Dahoah

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Halevi, an Israeli whose own research challenged the more widely accepted figures. Halevi explained the issue:

> *"These data banks have an enormous influence," he says. "I found PCHR statistics in UN reports…The UN relies on them." So Halevi published dozens of articles on a popular Hebrew news sites, reporting his findings, always precise, never overstating his claim, but scathing nevertheless. Soon he found himself in a war of words with a B'stelem's spokeswoman [sic], who wrote on Israel's News1 web site, "Halevi is exploiting a Palestinian family's tragedy for political gain" and "he dances on Palestinian blood." For his part, Halevi says* ***both organizations are frequently inaccurate, and attributes their contortions to their political motives****: "The former chairperson of the board of B'Tselem said in an interview that the organization's goal is a one-state solution. PCHR has the same goal. They reject Israel's existence as a Jewish state."*

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Not only are the facts distorted, journalists are simply outsourcing their responsibility to independently verify casualties. The aura of unquestioned authority news services confer on these organizations is known as "the halo effect."

It's not enough for reporters to "cite" Palestinian health sources, UN agencies, or NGOs as their sources — the media must make clear to readers that the figures should be treated with a dose of skepticism.

Alternatively, they could follow the footsteps of Italian reporter Lorenzo Cremonisi, who, in 2009 (to the anger of fellow journalists), visited Gaza hospitals, talked to Palestinian journalists, and reported that the Palestinian casualty figures of Operation Cast Lead were vastly inflated.

Checkbook journalism: Paying interviewees for their stories or for access is widely banned by mainstream news services but still sometimes occurs — especially in the realm of more in-depth documentaries. While disclosure is a must, even that does not resolve the problems. Andy Schotz, chairman of the ethics committee of the Society of Professional Journalists explained why:

> *Schotz says reporters thinking about paying sources for information should ask themselves:* ***Will a paid source tell you the truth, or tell you what you want to hear?***

Paying sources creates other problems. "By paying a source ***you now have a business relationship with someone you're trying to cover objectively****," Schotz says. "You've created a conflict of interest in the process."*

In December, 2016, the A&E Channel cancelled an eight-part documentary about the Ku Klux Klan after learning that "third-party producers had given money to some of the participants in order to facilitate access."

Anonymous sources: There's a time and place for reporters to rely on anonymous sources to share information. But it's unethical for journalists to allow sources to attack people behind a shield of anonymity, and it's also questionable whether any story should ever rely solely on unnamed sources.

Other examples: When John Kerry made some remarks behind closed doors about Israel becoming an "apartheid state" in 2014, reporter Josh Rogin explained to readers how he got the story. Former AP journalist Matti Friedman's revelation that the Associated Press blacklisted Professor Gerald Steinberg from being quoted in stories. Politico's Mike Allen seeking access to Chelsea Clinton

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by promising positive coverage. Ethical questions raised by the new use of virtual reality in journalism.

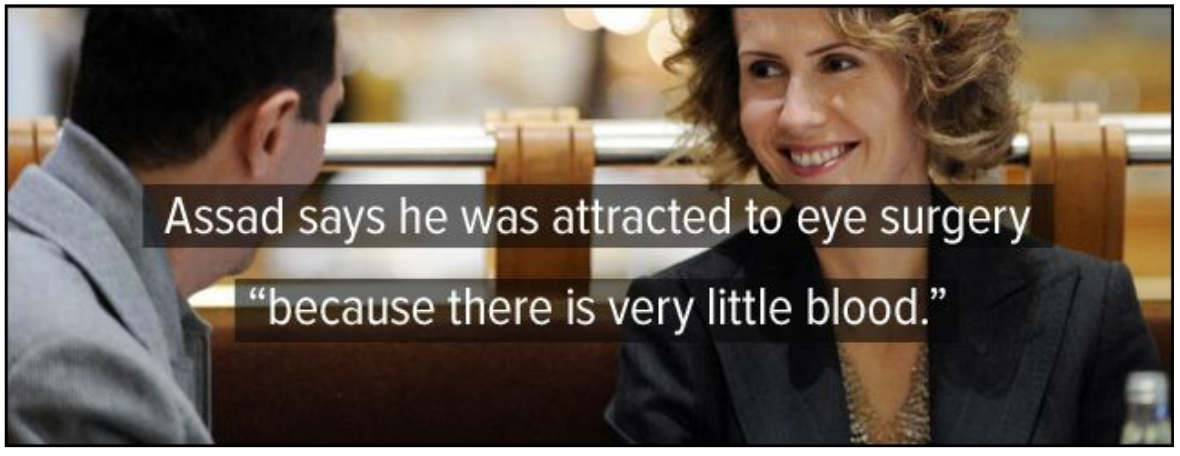
A reporter who scored a jailhouse interview by misrepresenting herself to prison guards. An Indian journalist who faced criminal charges after a soldier she "interviewed" with a hidden camera committed suicide. New York Times reporter Jeffrey Gettleman explaining the dilemmas and methodology behind his report on international ape smuggling.

Circumstances

We don't think about the circumstances journalists work under because they're not usually relevant for run-of-the-mill updates. But if reporters work under threats of intimidation, get special access with the expectation of favorable coverage, or are used by sources with their own agenda, it certainly impacts the coverage and demands disclosure.

Example: A 2011 Vogue profile of Bashar and Asma Assad not only whitewashed the regime's brutality, it didn't disclose that a PR firm arranged everything for journalist Joan Juliet Buck, who was kept on a tight leash by Syrian minders and whose laptop was tampered with in Damascus.

Even worse, by the time the article was published, the Arab Spring was under way. The profile was so utterly discredited, Vogue removed the article from its website (you can read it at Gawker). Buck left Vogue under a cloud, but she was free to write a mea culpa explaining how the story came about.



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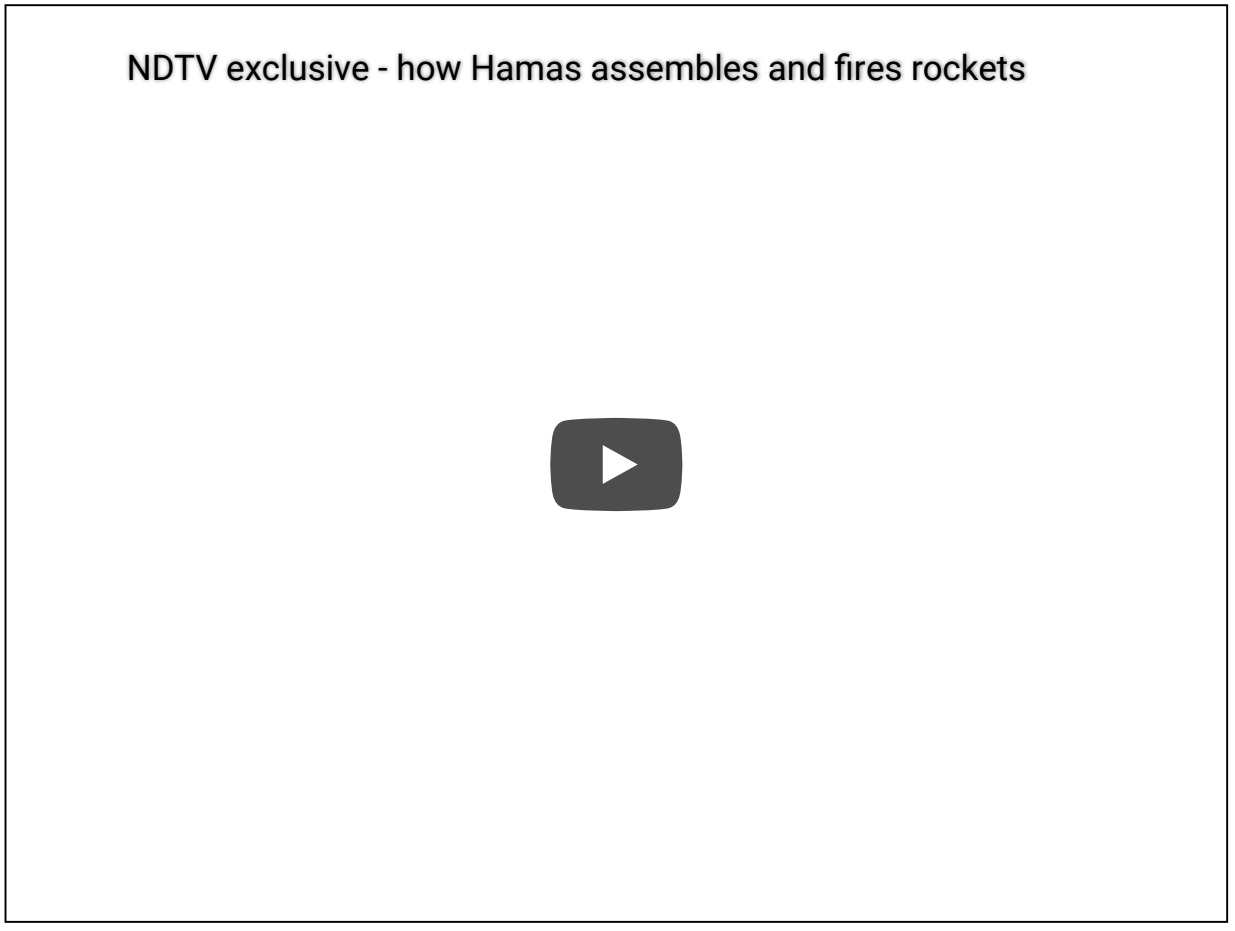
Example: Unlike other correspondents in Lebanon during the 2006 war, CNN's Nic Robertson and Time magazine's Christopher Allbritton described the restrictions Hezbollah placed on foreign reporters, including threats, and keeping copies of journalists's passports.

Example: Hamas intimidated journalists during Operation Protective Edge of 2014. But very, very few Gaza war correspondents disclosed threats to their lives or rockets launched in close proximity to the journalists. One news service, India's NDTV, aired footage of a rocket launch outside a hotel where much of the foreign press stayed — but only after the NDTV crew left Gaza.



Example: A 2010 Israeli-Lebanese border clash was remarkably well-photographed by Reuters — too well, in fact. A case study raised troubling questions about the number of photographers, their proximity to the action, the death of one photojournalist, and the fact that several images suspiciously credited *nobody* by name. Were the photographers used by someone on the Lebanese side or did they have associations with other Lebanese groups that would've raised conflicts of interest?

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Example: Peace Now, an anti-settlement watchdog, creating a self-serving "settlement crisis" in 2014 when it released a "news flash" about building plans in a Jerusalem neighborhood beyond the Green Line.

The news flash, however, was "embargoed," which means the information was made known to reporters on the understanding that it wouldn't be reported until a date noted on the news flash "for immediate release." In this case, the date was during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to the US. This despite the fact that the building in Givat Hamatos had been approved as far back as December 2012.

Other examples: A group of six local TV anchors seeking interviews with President Obama in 2016 were told they would each get one-on-one time on condition that one of their questions be about Supreme Court nominee Merrick Garland. How ethical was their agreement?

An op-ed written by US Sen. Orrin Hatch reacting to a meeting with a Supreme Court nominee — before the meeting occurred — which was prematurely published and then removed from the web site of the Deseret News.

The "double-edged sword" faced by local and foreign female journalists in the Middle East.

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Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest is simply defined as "a conflict between the private interests and the official responsibilities of a person in a position of trust." The mainstream media is in a position of trust too.

We usually associate the media's conflicts of interest with issues like reporters in personal relationships with people in the news, kissing up to advertisers, the entangling ties of the news industry's corporate ownership, or when a book, restaurant, or travel review goes bad. But there's more:

Example: Annapolis Capital Gazette reporter Chase Cook covering the trial of Jarrod Ramos, who is charged with killing five of Cook's colleagues in a newsroom shooting spree.

Example: In 2007, Britain's National Union of Journalists voted to boycott Israel, only to abandon the boycott a few months later. In 2014, the NUJ considered again (but rejected) supporting the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement against Israel.

Example: Editors of HuffPost Arabi with undisclosed ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Example: National Public Radio, which received hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Ploughshares Fund to plug the Iranian nuclear deal, was accused of silencing one of the accord's top Congressional critics. In a lengthy response, ombudsman Elizabeth Jensen denied the Ploughshares' grant skewed NPR's coverage, but admitted the mere perception of a conflict of interest was very damaging, and that greater disclosure may be called for.

Example: The Boston Globe apologized in 2010 for sending reporter Michael Corcoran to cover a commencement speech by then-Israeli ambassador Michael Oren. A follow-up editors note said Corcoran "failed to disclose that he had previously editorialized in personal Internet posts against Israeli policy toward Palestinians" and didn't even report the substance of Oren's address. Instead Corcoran wrote about 20 protesters outside the venue.

Other examples include questions raised by CNN hiring Corey Lewandowski as a political commentator immediately after he was dismissed as Donald Trump's campaign manager and when CNN dismissed Democratic party strategist Donna Brazile for leaking questions on a CNN-hosted presidential debate to Hillary Clinton's staffers. (See Jack Shafer's take on the conflict of interests among the TV networks' talking heads offering commentary and analysis during the 2016 presidential campaign.)

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CNN's partisan pundits Donna Brazile and Corey Lewandowski

Are pro-Trump pundits working in the news media *legally bound* to say nice things about Trump by undisclosed nondisparagement agreements?

Also, the Las Vegas Review-Journal setting disclosure guidelines for stories involving the interests of its publisher, Sheldon Adelson, a casino mogul and Republican party donor; Bloomberg News editor Kathy Kiely resigning over concerns the news service couldn't appropriately cover publisher Michael Bloomberg's considered presidential bid. Journalists resigning from Breitbart News over the web site's pro-Donald Trump stance.

The Columbia Journalism Review uncovered why many American political reporters refrain from voting in presidential primaries:

> *The candidate a voter backs is confidential, but, as in other states, the party ballot that they choose is not.* ***A presidential primary vote is a record of participation in a political party*** *. . .*

Tensions between the Los Angeles Times and the Walt Disney Company, one of the paper's biggest advertisers. At one point, reporters received an unusual instruction: *not* to tweet praise of an investigative series on Disney's business dealings with Anaheim, Calif. Disney barred LA Times reporters from press screenings of Disney movies, leading journalists to boycott Disney.

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Two of Newsweek's top editors and a senior writer were fired, reportedly over an investigation of the magazine's parent company's finances:

In June, 2018, there were calls to fire Fox News personality Kimberly Guilfoyle over her personal relationship with Donald Trump Jr. while she covered his father's sex scandals and the Mueller investigation.

> *She can't report on the most powerful family in the country while dating one of them.*

Reporter Jim Brunner of Rochester, Minnesota's KTTC News was fired for wearing a MAGA hat while covering a Trump rally.

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Replying to @MDVancleave
And now a block away a couple hundred anti-Trump demonstrators occupying an intersection. Rochester Minn.

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Whyyyyy?

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Other miscellaneous examples include the Toronto Star's coverage of the suicide of one its reporters amid allegations of an improper newsroom relationship and issues raised by several Boston sports journalists in personal relationships with the baseball players they covered. More recently, the New York Post fired its police bureau chief "after admitting he had an affair with a hooker who's the star witness in a federal cop corruption probe while he was covering the high-profile case."

Lewis Wallace examined the issues of journalists "crossing the threshold" between covering news to becoming part of the story — including an indigenous journalist arrested at Standing Rock and a free lance writer who proactively gave up his Toronto Star column to pursue black activism, among other examples.

Then there was a 2017 survey suggesting that more than 1,000 UK bloggers think it is not important to declare sponsored posts.

Responsiveness

The media's responsibility to readers goes beyond the finished news product. Responsiveness to readers — answering questions, clarifying issues, addressing complaints — ties up the loose ends of transparency and helps hold the media accountable to the public. Sometimes, however, the news industry needs reminding.

Example: After penning a column sharply critical of the IDF during the 2014 Gaza war, Australian columnist Mike Carlton was fired for writing abusive emails and tweets to readers.

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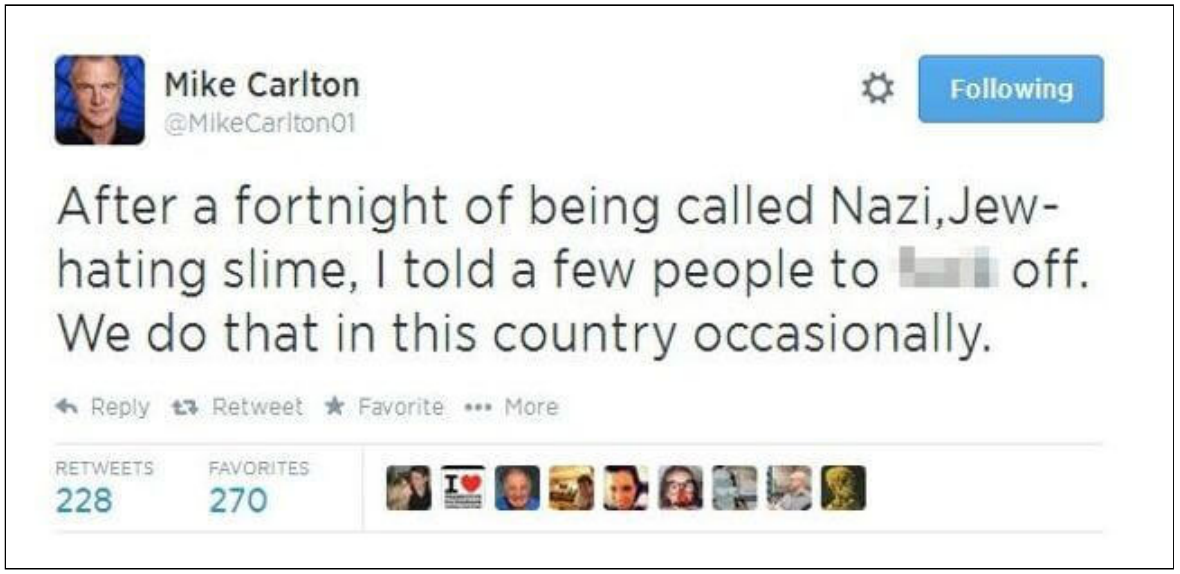

Example: Kitty Holland of the Irish Times refused to engage in a dialogue with HonestReporting, saying on Twitter, "Not interacting with Zionists anymore."

Example: No discussion of responsiveness would be complete without mentioning the labyrinthine complaints system of the publicly funded BBC. Anyone who has ever tried filing a complaint with the BBC knows how difficult it is to navigate the complaints process and receive a response.

Further, to cover up the Balen report, a 2004 internal assessment of BBC News coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the BBC denied 400 Freedom of Information requests (including one by HonestReporting) and spent $500,000 in legal fees. The complaints system isn't fit for purpose, and repeatedly raises questions about the BBC's willingness to subject itself to public scrutiny.

Click to learn more about each individual category.

The 8 Violations of Media Objectivity

1. Misleading definitions: Prejudicing readers through language.
2. Imbalanced reporting: Distorting news through disproportionate coverage.

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3. Opinions disguised as news: Inappropriately injecting opinion or interpretation into coverage.
4. Lack of context: Withholding a frame of reference for readers.
5. Selective omission: Reporting certain events over others, or withholding key details.
6. Using true facts to draw false conclusions: Infecting news with flawed logic.
7. Distortion of facts: Getting the facts wrong.
8. Lack of transparency: Failing to be open and accountable to readers.

See also the introduction to this series and some final thoughts and acknowledgements, wrapping the concepts together and raising awareness for news literacy.

"Red Lines: The Eight Categories of Media Bias," is available on Amazon for purchase as an e-book.

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Pesach Benson

A Baltimore native, Pesach is HonestReporting's deputy managing editor. Since joining the staff in 2001, he edited the Israel Daily News Stream and authored the e-book, Red Lines: HonestReporting's 8 Categories of Media Bias. Before moving to Israel in 1995, he worked as a reporter for the Baltimore Jewish Times. Pesach has a B.A. in political science from the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, where he was executive editor of the campus newspaper.

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A view of the security barrier near the Palestinian village of Abu Dis next to Jerusalem. Photo by Lior Mizrahi/Flash90

The Truth About the Security Barrier

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